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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the style of leadership required in an evaluation process as well as the conditions under which the participation of various groups of evaluation users may be ensured, using examples from higher education in Quebec (Canada). It reviews the organization and evaluation of higher education institutions in the province, providing specific information on program evaluation at Laval University. The paper then reviews conditions favoring evaluation success, including institutional commitment, clear definitions of roles and responsibilities, clarification of what is at stake in regard to the evaluation process, the cooperation of those involved in the evaluation, promptness in the completion of the evaluation, and the importance of professional help and support services. It is concluded that if participation in the evaluation process is to be effective, shared leadership must be carried out during all stages of the evaluation process. It is argued that this type of leadership emerges in response to the dictates of the situation, to the competencies required and to the roles played. (MDM)

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How to Promote Leadership and Participation in the Process of Periodic Programme Evaluation

Lessons Learned from Evaluation Practice in Higher Education in Quebec

by

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Introduction

The key to success in any evaluation process lies in securing the co-operation of the those directly affected by the programme. Promoters of a style of evaluation which makes use of information generated by the process itself insist on placing those parties with a stake in the programme at the centre of the process, since ultimately it is they who will have to put the results to use (Greene, 1988; Patton, 1997, Fetterman, 1997). Having become aware of the importance of involving parties impacted by an evaluation, institutions have opted for participatory models. On the other hand, years of experience in the university setting have taught us that the willingness to participate is not always a given and that participation requires support if it is to be effective.

Using examples drawn from the field of higher education in Quebec, this paper discusses the style of leadership required in an evaluation process as well as the conditions under which the participation of the various groups of evaluation users may be ensured. In the university setting, these users are administrators, professors, students and graduates, prospective employers, and government which assume the responsibility for financing higher education.

Evaluation Leadership at the Provincial Level

Quebec organizes its higher education somewhat differently than do most other jurisdictions in Canada and the United States. Its structure is unique in that, between high school and university, it offers a level of collegiate education known as the CEGEP (General and Vocational Colleges). These junior colleges typically offers two main streams: three year technical-vocational programmes and two-year pre-university programmes.

At the organizational level, the Ministry of Education of Quebec intervenes by means of the budgetary regulations that govern university financing; operational grants represented 87 per cent of university funding in 1993 (Hamel, 1994). Since the provincial government funds universities with a view to maintaining accessibility in all regions and for all socio-economic groups, accountability is essential.

Programme evaluation provides a rare opportunity for appraising the quality and relevance of the various dimensions of a training programme using the needs of individuals, of society and of the science in question as the basic criteria of assessment. The implementation of a programme evaluation policy is one way of ensuring that programmes are actually getting evaluated (CREPUQ, 1994). The application of such a policy depends to a large extent on the leadership and support which the system is able to provide and on the level of participation of those affected by the programmes.

While evaluation has become part of the general institutional culture of Quebec's colleges and universities, it takes place within different frameworks at these two levels. Programmes at the collegiate level are evaluated under the leadership and supervision of the College Education Evaluation Commission (CEEC). The Commission is an independent government organization whose evaluation mandate covers most aspects of college education, with special emphasis on student achievement and programmes of study (Government of Quebec, 1994 and 1997).

In contrast to the junior colleges, universities enjoy a great deal of autonomy. Carrying full responsibility for their programmes, each university develops its own programmes of teaching and research. There is, however, a special organization which deals with the creation of new programmes and the periodic evaluation of existing programmes at the university level–the Conference of Rectors and Principals of Quebec or CREPUQ. To translate this into the American scene, we might call this group the Association of University Presidents. This organization, funded by its member institutions, brings Quebec universities together on a voluntary basis. Its role involves co-ordination and rationalization of the programmes offered by all the universities of the Province of Quebec. The scope of my remarks here will be limited to the question of programme evaluation at the university level.

In 1994, CREPUQ adopted an Appraisal Policy to ensure that universities evaluate their programmes, using procedures which satisfy a set of generally recognized criteria and standards that correspond to the high expectations which society expects from universities. To further enhance the credibility of this initiative, the policy was to be accompanied by an external audit procedure entrusted to the Programme Appraisal Audit Commission or the PAAC.

In 1997, the Association of University Presidents (CREPUQ) announced the creation of *CUP (la Commission des universités sur les programmes* or The University Programmes Board). This board was set up to study programme relevance and overlap among its member institutions. The university community agreed to undertake this task during a series of public meetings known as the Estates General on Education. The Minister of Education agreed in turn to take this initiative into consideration in any future plans related to university education. CUP's several objectives complement the universities' own efforts to rationalize their activities. For its part, the CREPUQ is exercising a leadership role at the provincial level as it supports a process of negotiation and trade-offs among its participating institutions.

Periodic Programme Evaluation at Laval University

Some 33 000 students are registered in one or another of the 300 programmes offered at Laval University. Our institution began to evaluate its programmes of study in the early 1980s. Although not a systematic effort, each year this operation did evaluate 5 to 10 programmes on a voluntary basis. In 1992, the University decided to systematize its programme evaluation, with the effect that the overall process was speeded up until some 30 to 40 programmes were being evaluated annually under the joint responsibility of the central administration of the university and the various faculties. Since 1997, in a move intended to decentralize power and responsibility within the university, programme evaluation was integrated into evaluation at the faculty level (Laval University, 1997).

The PAAC visited Laval University in 1993. As a part of the follow up to its recommendations, the University adopted a new periodic evaluation procedure for use in all its programmes beginning in 1995. This new procedure gave an important role to external experts from other universities who were asked to determine, based on their own visit to the faculty and on the faculty's self-evaluation report, whether or not the programmes being offered were relevant and of a sufficiently high quality to make them competitive with similar programmes offered by other universities. The changes implemented in the wake of the PAAC's visit are an indicator of the impact of the leadership assumed by this organization in the Quebec higher education system.

Conditions Favouring Evaluation Success

Two years after the implementation of the new evaluation procedure, we believe that the time is right for a preliminary assessment which will allow us, should the need be felt, to correct any shortcomings in our way of doing things. Hoping to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the evaluation process as well as the conditions necessary for achieving effective participation, we conducted a series of interviews with key players.

The Institutional Commitment

When an institution officially undertakes a periodic evaluation of all its programmes, any and all mechanisms essential for it to attain its objectives must be put in place. It is not enough simply to build sufficient momentum to set the wheels of a massive evaluation project in motion. A genuine institutional commitment must be present in order to ensure that the operation is carried out, that the evaluations performed are of a sufficiently high quality and that recommendations emanating from the operation are implemented in a publicly accountable manner.

Laval University made a firm commitment to the process when it added an evaluation coordinator to its top management. This individual assumed a position of leadership, formulating directives and providing the means required to carry out the periodic evaluations in the time frames allotted. Deans, in the choosing when and what specific aspects to evaluate, exercise leadership with respect to the periodic evaluation of programmes within their own faculties. The administration of each faculty is thus responsible for establishing evaluation mandates, and at the end of the operation, for formally accepting to follow up on the evaluation's recommendations by proposing a plan of action to the University Council.

The Clear Definition of Roles and Responsibilities

The change in evaluation procedures gave rise to numerous reactions on the part of the groups of people involved. We noticed, for instance, that the participation of outside experts was generally looked upon with favour by those responsible for evaluation, in part because of the visibility it gave their programme. Resistance was experienced, however, in the selection process for members who were to serve on the final evaluation committee. Composed of professors who have no evident relationship to the programme being evaluated, since they come from outside the faculty, the role of this committee is to offer a synthesis of the report of the external examiners and the faculty's own report. It is they who formulate any recommendations emanating from the process. In our opinion, it was because the role played by this committee was not well understood that it met with such resistance.

One possible explanation for this mistrust was the doubt regarding the ability of non-specialists to pronounce an enlightened judgement on matters peculiar to the programme under evaluation, or the fear that they might give a biased judgment thus favouring a rival programme in the eyes of a potential clientele. In order to avoid such conflicts, it is necessary to clearly define the roles of the various participants and to see to it that the rules are applied so as to guarantee impartiality in the selection process for those called upon to appraise the programme.

The Clarification of What is Really at Stake

Another factor which likely adversely affects the involvement of the main actors has to do with a resistance to change. Sometimes those involved with evaluations sense that certain unavowed elements are coming into play in the process. While in our context, the stakes are essentially identical from one evaluation to the next, we were able to identify different reactions on the part of individuals who were concerned by a loss of autonomy with respect to programme orientation. This underlines how important it is that administrators make known, from the outset, limitations of the political or financial variety (for example: the reduction of the number of programmes offered in a particular field of study). Once the constraints are known the room to manoeuvre will be reduced, but any effort expended will be done within more realistic limits. Nothing is more disheartening for participants in an evaluation than to see a recommendation introduced which is not based on information generated by that process. Since recommendation must be made in any evaluation, it is important to clarify the intended uses of a particular evaluation at the very beginning of the operation.

The Co-operation of Those Involved

Experience has taught us the advantages of letting people know how important their participation is to the success of the evaluation process. Given the large number of people touched by a university programme, it would, however, be difficult, if not wholly unrealistic to think that a formula might be worked out whereby everyone gets involved at every stage in the process. It is useful therefore, to distinguish two different levels of participation. On the first level, participation would entail the active involvement of a relatively small group of participants who would form a team to oversee the evaluation. At a second level, involvement would take the form of a series of consultations which would allow the strengths and weaknesses of the programme under evaluation to be identified.

Unfortunately, we have seen people who show up at the very last stage of the process... This sort of behaviour risks slowing down the evaluation process and putting obstacles in the way of implementing recommendations since the report has not been appropriated by all the concerned players.

Touching on another aspect of the overall process, we noticed that the leadership role which students are able to play is often missed. Their contribution is underestimated when it comes to active participation in certain strategic steps in the evaluation process, for example when dealing with the fine tuning and administration of the tools used for consultation as well as with the contextualization of the data gathered.

Here then, are a few initiatives which we have found useful in trying to get users involved: an official launch of the operation, an information letter sent to faculty administrators, announcements at faculty-wide and departmental gatherings, invitations to student associations and finally the dissemination of evaluation results to those who participated in the process and in the media. The invitation to participate must be extended in a climate of confidence, of cordiality and of democratic process.

Keeping the Pace Up

Under old procedures, it was not unheard of for a process of periodic evaluation to stretch out over a three-year period. Prolonging an operation can produce both positive and negative effects. On the plus side, we have the time required to carefully lay the ground work and to craft the appropriate tools for consultation, as well as the time needed to properly gather and analyze the data. Time is also on the side of those seeking to open people up to new ways of looking at the programme and thus for preparing the ground for change. On the negative side, the stamina of those responsible for the operation may be found wanting and a loss of interest is a real possibility when this happens. Stretching the process out inevitably leads to a change in membership of the piloting team, to down time and to unforeseen setbacks. Limiting the time allotted for a programme evaluation within a year has the advantage of keeping the pace of work brisk and the morale and motivation of participants high.

The Importance of Professional Help and Support Services

The complexity of the process and the limitations linked to the length of an operation underlines the need for proper support, in other words, support assured by co-operation among people coming from different administrative units. Here are a few examples that will illustrate the variety of efforts made to support the evaluation process.

Attached to the central academic administration of the University, an internal consultant specialized in measurement and evaluation provides help with the planning of the various stages of the evaluation process. This evaluation facilitator ensures the quality and confidentiality of the data gathered during the numerous consultations and offers follow-up services to make sure recommendations are actually implemented.

The Office of Institutional Research compiles a statistical file on the clientele of the programme under evaluation and provides the results of the official inquiries which it regularly conducts with the graduates of the various programmes. Such information, made available at the outset of a periodic evaluation, allows one to choose relevant questions for consideration and allows these questions to be written into the mandate of the evaluation.

The Student Placement Office, which deals with between five and six thousand job offers per year, analyzes and reports on the needs and emerging trends within the job market in those sectors of the economy targeted by the programme under evaluation.

Conclusion

Our attempts to achieve a meaningful participation of the actors involved in the evaluation process have led us to enumerate some basic requirements. The participation of those involved in the process is influenced by a large number of factors which contribute to the degree of success achieved by a programme evaluation process.

If participation is to be effective, the image of a single great leader followed by the mass of those involved must be abandoned. Shared leadership appears to be one condition of success, that is, a leadership shared among several people and spread over time, following the various stages of the evaluation process. Oriented towards a specific task, this type of leadership emerges in response to the dictates of the situation, to the competencies required and to the roles played. In short, it is a kind of relay leadership...

In closing, I would like to offer a thought drawn from a book published in 1975 by Professor Henri Saint-Pierre from Laval University, under a title which translates roughly to: Participation, Towards Empowerment :

> **«The most important thing is not to imagine a participation that is utopic but rather to believe in one's own resources ; when the air is clear, difficulties get resolved, since they too become a target of responsible action.»**

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